

Appendix A

Principles and caveats –
some limitations and constraints of
the current evidence base

In examining the potential relationship between neglect and CSE, IFCSA or HSB, these three scopes attempt to avoid contributing to narratives and practices that can be blaming or punitive towards parents, in particular mother. Neglect is typically the absence of care for a child by family members and by others in relevant systems and communities – often ‘others’ who have neglected the needs of the child’s primary carers.

In particular, the scopes underline the dangers in failing to recognise the impact of social and material disadvantage – what Hooper et al (2006) have referred to as ‘societal neglect’ – on parenting capacity (Daniel and Taylor, 2006; Featherstone, 2016; Turney, 2000). Recognising this wider aspect of neglect not only avoids unhelpful blaming, but also opens up a variety of avenues for effective prevention (Turney and Taylor, 2014). CSE, IFCSA and HSB all significantly increase the complexity and strain of parenting, and strengths-based relationship-focused responses for parents and families are vital.

Limitations to the evidence base

1. *It is difficult to discriminate causality.* Very few research designs enable firm conclusions to be drawn around causal relationships, as there are often competing hypotheses that cannot be ruled out. For example, if depressed young people report neglect in their earlier childhood more than non-depressed young people, this could be due to: (a) neglect increasing the risk of depression; (b) depression negatively colouring memories of childhood; (c) a third factor, such as genes or parental mental health difficulties, increasing the risk of both; or (d) young people who receive interventions developing a greater capacity to identify and describe adversity in their childhoods (Widom, Raphael and DuMont, 2004). Prospective, controlled, longitudinal designs help to establish causality by ruling out other hypotheses; they do not depend on people’s recall and they control for the influence of other factors. However, there are very few prospective longitudinal studies on child maltreatment either in the UK or abroad, and those that do exist yield little evidence on potential links between neglect and other forms of maltreatment such as IFCSA, CSE or HSB.
2. *Neglect typically co-occurs with other forms of maltreatment and adversity,* and much of the research considers the impact of child maltreatment as a whole rather than neglect specifically. Despite neglect being the most commonly reported form of child maltreatment, the study of neglected has itself been neglected (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg van IJzendoorn, 2013). Some studies have explored the impact of neglect but without controlling for other forms of child abuse – so, for example, it is hard to know whether neglect is exerting an influence or the physical abuse with which it substantially overlaps. And if additional factors (such as parental substance misuse) are not controlled for, it is hard to know whether it is the neglect or the substance misuse that is having an impact. At times this scope is not able to conclude that neglect is exerting an influence above and beyond the influence of another adversity (such as emotional abuse or parental mental health difficulties). However, even without this level of specificity, significant policy and practice implications do emerge.
3. *Few studies explore mediators of a relationship between neglect and CSE, CSA or HSB directly.* A focus for all three scopes is the potential role of mediators that might contribute to (or provide a pathway in) a relationship between neglect and CSE, IFCSA or HSB. A number of studies indicate a relationship between neglect and a particular factor (for example, social isolation, depression or anxiety disorders), which other studies have in turn identified as a vulnerability for later victimisation. However, very little research looks at neglect, potential mediators and any one of CSA, CSE or HSB in a single study.
4. *The potential importance of sociocultural factors distinctive to the UK in increasing vulnerability to CSE/IFCSA/HSB.* The majority of relevant research in this field has been conducted in North America, where there may be different patterns of risk and vulnerability, different levels of societal awareness and a different social and legal context. However, there appear to be some broad similarities (Cameron et al, 2015) and in more well-established areas of child maltreatment research (for example, the impact of sexual abuse), European and North American research has yielded similar findings. Drawing tentative conclusions about young people within the UK on the basis of North American research is therefore warranted, though caution is needed regarding the general applicability of findings to UK settings.

5. *There are different forms of neglect.* Neglect is often treated as one construct, yet when studies have explored its different forms (eg, physical versus emotional, or sub-dividing physical forms), it becomes clear that these exert different patterns of harm (see, for example, Petrenko et al, 2012). Moreover, differences in severity, chronicity (how long the neglect persists) and the developmental period at which a child experiences neglect are all likely to affect its impact, but these dimensions are also typically not explored (Hildyard and Wolfe, 2002; Manly et al, 2001). Often such nuance cannot be applied because samples are not large enough. Fewer studies on neglect, combined with the heterogeneity of measurements of neglect (Daniel, Taylor and Scott, 2010), mean there are few systematic reviews¹ and meta-analyses of neglect – and it is these types of reviews/analyses that are important in building up the evidence base by drawing together findings from a number of studies.
6. *There are different forms of sexual exploitation of children and young people.* Different factors may increase vulnerability to different forms of sexual exploitation, such as online grooming, organised abuse within a gang, abuse from an offender posing as a boyfriend, or coercion into trading sex for money on the street. Small-scale studies (such as Whittle et al, 2013) suggest this is so, but research commonly does not differentiate between forms of CSE. There are however somewhat separate research literatures on sexual abuse in adolescence and young adulthood, and on ‘prostitution’,² ‘selling sex’ and commercial sexual exploitation within adolescence and young adulthood, which may approximate, or overlap substantially with, different forms of CSE; both are explored within this scope (their differences to CSE notwithstanding).
7. *Recent studies acknowledging overlapping forms of victimisation, abuse and adversity are emerging,* but this is an early field of study in the area of abuse and maltreatment. Historically, research studies have focused on only one form of abuse. And while recognition of multiple and overlapping forms of abuse is important for understanding the challenging environments and experiences that children and young people face – and the broader impacts of these overlapping experiences – these emerging studies obscure knowledge of the relationship between specific forms of abuse.
8. *Intersectionality is not well attended to.* Additionally, not enough attention has been paid within the literature towards the ways in which gender, ethnicity, disability, culture and socio-demographics may affect the impact of neglect and vulnerability to CSE. To some extent, this can reflect small and often homogeneous samples, which are not representative of the diversity of people who experience neglect or CSE (Fox, 2016).

¹ **Systematic reviews** involve a detailed and comprehensive plan and search strategy derived a priori, with the goal of reducing bias by identifying, appraising, and synthesizing all relevant studies on a particular topic (Uman, 2011). Systematic reviews often include a meta-analysis component, which involves using statistical techniques to synthesize the data from several studies into a single quantitative estimate or summary effect size (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006)

² This being the term that many research studies, especially those conducted outside of the UK, have used to denote ‘selling sex’ irrespective of the age of the people caught up in it. When discussing the findings of such studies, this scope re-names ‘child prostitution’ as a form of CSE or as the commercial sexual exploitation of children.